

Labor Narratives and Identity Construction of Marginalized Women on Social Media Platforms

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Abstract. The nature of digital labor and identity expression of rural women, single mothers, and women with disabilities are influenced by intersecting class and gender constraints on social media platforms. This paper will focus on such marginalized groups and explore the characteristics of their labor stories and the reasoning behind identity formation, and reveal how the platform economy contains structural inequities. This research utilizes in-depth interviews as well as verification of data by using the official reports and 12 field cases. It is found that despite the fact that these women build various identities based on labor narratives, they experience urgent dilemmas such as unclear limits of work, inflexible algorithmic labels, and social shame, which significantly constrain their creative and development space. These narratives have also shifted and moved beyond simple images of survival into conscious expressions of self-worth. In contrast to the support strategies of the mainstream platforms, this paper suggests a holistic strategy of platform power, community-based support, and institutional protections, to provide a practical perspective on enhancing the digital labor opportunities of marginalized women and empowering their identity affirmation.

Keywords: Social Media Platforms; Marginalized Women; Digital Labor; Identity Construction; Labor Narratives; Platform Economy.

1. Introduction

Conventional employment structures and social labor divisions have been transformed by the widespread development of digital technology. Accessible and flexible forms of social media have become key sources of employment, income and self-expression among disadvantaged people including the rural women, single mothers and women with disabilities.

Based on the study of the Value of Douyin in Facilitating High-Quality Full Employment (2025) published by the China Academy of Labor and Social Security Science and the School of Government Management of Peking University, it has been found that in 2024, Douyin employed over 64.55 million people. Full-time mothers who care for their children, rural women, and people with disabilities are the main components of the platform flexible workforce. Nevertheless, the worth of their digital work is still severely underappreciated, and their stories are pushed to the periphery of the mainstream discussion. The current literature gives much consideration to urban middle-class women and the most popular online influencers, with very little research being conducted on labor experience, narrative choices, and identity issues of grassroots women in social media settings, which clearly leaves a gap in the literature.

The intersectionality theory serves as the analytical framework of the investigation which uses the in-depth interviews with twelve marginalized women creators and data of public platforms to systematically analyze the labor narrative trajectories, identity construction logic and structural barriers of these women. The purpose is to fill the gaps in the current body of research and offer theoretical guidance on how to promote gender equity and ensure the protection of labor rights in digital environments. The results show that although marginalized women create and incorporate various identities using their digital labor narratives, they still encounter issues such as fuzzy lines between work and life, strict algorithmic identification, and social disgrace. Their creative space and potential are limited and their narratives have changed to more than just the depiction of survival but are actually expressing personal value [1]. Based on industry practice, this article proposes an

optimization path for platform empowerment, community mutual assistance, and institutional guarantee coordination, providing feasible references for improving their digital labor situation and strengthening their identity recognition.

2. The Digital Labor Landscape of Marginalized Women: Types, Traits, and Data Profiling

In the social media ecosystem, rural women, single mothers, women with disabilities, and middle-aged and elderly women collectively constitute marginalized groups in the digital labor field. The labor practice of this group is mainly in the form of survival-oriented entrepreneurship and emotional content production, which forms a clear distinction from the development-oriented professional creation of urban female creators. The content creation of rural women focuses on agricultural product sales and rural life documentaries. This group of people, while investing longer labor hours, always face a significant income gap compared to urban female creators. The downward expansion of the digital economy has opened up flexible employment opportunities for grassroots women, but has not fundamentally improved their disadvantaged situation of low labor income and limited development space [2].

The special survey on online employment by China Women's News presents the reality that single mothers rely on social media platforms to obtain core income. The dual task of parenting responsibility and content creation has left their working hours highly fragmented for this group. The high overlap between family and work scenes has left grassroots women with only fragmented time slots to complete all tasks such as content shooting and account operation. Disabled female creators need to continuously convey positive emotions while outputting content to respond to public attention, forming a deep combination of emotional labor and digital labor. The fact that the platform algorithm has a preference to entertainment content restricts the spread of productive content produced by marginalized women in particular, so their labor value is not well recognized by the market and audience.

The overall income level of marginalized female creators is relatively low, with 34.3% of single mothers earning 2000 CNY or less per month and 63.5% earning less than 4000 CNY per month. This proportion far exceeds the proportion of urban female creators in the same income range; the income of rural female creators is generally concentrated in the range of 1000–3000 CNY, and there is a significant gap in income level compared to urban female creators. Their proportion in the top accounts of the platform is also much lower than their proportion in the overall creators [3]. The distribution imbalance in the field of digital labor is not caused by individual differences in abilities, but by the replication and reinforcement of traditional gender division of labor and social class differences by the platform economy. This structural problem not only continues to compress the development space of marginalized women, but also makes it difficult for their digital labor value to be reasonably recognized, further deepening the survival and development difficulties of marginalized women in the online employment scene, and posing tangible barriers to gender equality employment in the digital age.

3. Narrative Strategies of Labor: A Discursive Shift from Survival Predicament to Value Reconstruction

In the digital labor scene, marginalized women redefine labor value through three narrative methods, shifting from passively expressing difficulties to actively expressing their own ideas. Many female creators turn real life into content, recording the daily life of raising children and packaging agricultural products, showcasing the persistence and difficulty of grassroots entrepreneurship. They do not romanticize their lives, and every shot exudes genuine authenticity. This expression close to reality breaks the fixed impression of women on the platform, which can resonate emotionally with audiences, and also let more people see the real working state of marginal women [4].

Rural women and intangible cultural heritage artisans can change external biases by showcasing their skills. They use short videos to capture the complete production process of Miao embroidery and

traditional weaving, combining traditional craftsmanship with modern aesthetics. Many people have never been able to shoot or edit, but have gradually mastered basic skills. They have not only achieved personal income growth, but also encouraged women around them to participate in digital labor, demonstrating the labor ability of marginalized women with practical results, and providing new opportunities for traditional crafts to be disseminated on online platforms.

Female creators with similar experiences form mutual aid communities and rely on collective strength for development. Under the topic of women's entrepreneurship on various platforms, many grassroots women share their creative experiences, available resources, and support and encourage each other. Stable community collaboration has improved the income level and creative stability of these women, and scattered individual labor has also become collective action for group development.

This type of narrative style has always been constrained by platform traffic rules [5]. Platform algorithms prioritize positive and life-oriented content, and rural creators mostly choose to shoot content about harvest scenes and entrepreneurial growth. Videos that tell the story of real-life difficulties are usually difficult to gain high view counts.

The female creators frequently suffer the trade-off between real expression and platform visibility. The platform rules determine the way they produce their content and limit their discursive space. It is a typical problem of marginalized women who create digital content. Platform imperatives and authentic self-expression are hard to harmonize. The creators need to transform their narrative practices in the current platform conditions to make sure that they do not lose both the real representation and the visibility of the algorithms.

4. Pathways to Identity Construction: Tensions, Integration, and Reconstruction of Threefold Identities

The marginalized women who perform digital labor on social media platforms are no longer passive audience but active content producers. Gender, digital labour and community-based identity intersect to co-construct a sense of self among them.

A lot of strain exists between conventional gender roles and digital worker identities due to the conflict between the normative gender expectations and new forms of digital labor [6]. When many rural women first tried live streaming sales, they would encounter opposition from their families. Family members accused them of being in the public eye and neglecting their families, and some women had to give up social media creation due to family pressure. This situation is very common in rural women's digital entrepreneurship, and it can be directly seen that traditional concepts hinder women's participation in digital labor.

Women not only become digital workers, but also take on the role of driving similar groups. Their labor value is no longer just about making money, but also extends to the social level. Li Yixin, a Wuhan-based blogger with a disability, also known as "Xingxingzi", shared her experience of starting a business using a wheelchair online. After accumulating over 80,000 followers, she formed a disabled entrepreneurship group. She teaches other women with disabilities how to run social media accounts and learn operations for free, helping them smoothly start online businesses. She has also transformed from a beneficiary into a peer supporter.

When marginalized women create content on platforms, they follow the platform rules and gradually adjust their expression direction step by step. At first, they just filmed their daily lives and honestly recorded the various difficulties they encountered in their labor. Afterwards, they gradually demonstrate their efforts and growth, and actively share their experiences to help people in similar situations. During this process, they gradually achieved a dual enhancement of personal value and social value.

The algorithm of the platform will limit the diverse possibilities of female identity expression. Algorithms tend to favor content that portrays traditional female characters, making it difficult for rural women to break free from the fixed label of virtuous wives and mothers, and women with

disabilities can only be framed in a single image of inspirational exemplars. They are unable to showcase more diverse facets of their identity, and this bias in algorithms also reinforces existing gender and identity stereotypes [7].

5. Structural Dilemma: Triple Constraints of Algorithmic Discipline, Capital Control, and Social Bias

Marginalized women are still constrained by structural difficulties when carrying out digital labor and identity construction on social media platforms. All this combination of algorithmic discipline, capital control and social bias forms many oppressive mechanisms that squeeze the development space of this group and make it difficult to achieve their labor value and recognize their identity.

The technical constraints brought by algorithms are the core dilemma. The platform relies on tagging and content classification mechanisms to limit the content of marginalized female creators to fixed areas such as rural life, parenting, and disability inspiration, compressing the boundaries of creation. According to reports from People's Daily Online and Science and Technology Daily, the number of views on agricultural technology popularization videos by rural female bloggers is far lower than that of daily rural life content, making it difficult to obtain mainstream traffic support from the platform. The Douyin algorithm takes user behavior as the core recommendation basis, and female creators' content is more likely to be included in the family and life sectors, while professional and technical content is difficult to enter the platform core recommendation queue [8].

The capital-driven labor alienation further exacerbates the survival dilemma of this group. According to relevant cases from CCTV and China News Service, some MCN institutions misappropriate creators' earnings through unequal contracts, squeezing the living space of anchors with exorbitant revenue-sharing ratios, long live-streaming hours, and high penalty fees for breach of contract [9]. Some institutions, in pursuit of traffic, force marginalized female creators to deliberately present their own disadvantaged situation, in order to cater to the audience's curiosity and directly infringe upon the creators' subject status and personality rights.

Social identity bias constitutes an external constraint on the development of this group. These creators generally face dual discrimination based on gender and identity, with rural women, women with disabilities, and single mothers being labeled as unproductive, capitalizing on their suffering, irresponsible, and other negative labels. According to research conducted by CCTV and People's Daily Online, the probability of female marginalized creators experiencing cyberbullying is much higher than that of ordinary creators. Negative evaluations often point to gender and identity attributes, which not only affect the psychological state of creators but also limit the long-term development of accounts.

The platform algorithm continues to solidify gender identity stereotypes. The targeted preference of algorithms for traditional female character content makes it difficult for rural women to break free from the label of "virtuous wives and good mothers", and women with disabilities are also limited to a single narrative framework of "inspirational exemplars". The diverse identity expression of this group is always rigidly restricted by algorithm rules.

6. Exploration of Empowerment Path: The Synergistic Effect of Platform Responsibility, Community Support, and Institutional Guarantee

To solve the digital labor dilemma of marginalized women on social media platforms and promote the healthy development of identity construction, it is necessary to rely on the multi-party linkage of platforms, communities, and institutions, establish a systematic empowerment mechanism, and help this group achieve dual improvement in labor benefits and identity recognition.

The platform should take the initiative to shoulder its main responsibility and use algorithm optimization and targeted support to break down the creative barriers brought by technology [10]. Douyin, under the guidance of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, promotes the "Star

Villages & Star Farmers" project and provides rural women creators with services such as traffic prioritization, skills training and supply-chain coordination, and expands the exposure and income increase channels for grassroots women in line with the characteristics of rural content dissemination. Xiaohongshu continues to improve its accessibility function layout, launching public welfare support measures for disabled creators, combined with basic operational guidance and community supporting resources, to ensure equal participation of women with disabilities in content creation. The platform also publicly discloses sharing and settlement rules, which can further stabilize the income expectations of female creators.

Based on the real-life scenarios of grassroots creation, the collective practice of female creators provides practical support for the development of digital labor. Yucheng District Rural Livestreaming Alliance Women's Federation in Ya'an City has built a comprehensive platform for training, resource linkage, and rights protection for local female anchors, effectively solving various practical problems in individual operations. Rural women's entrepreneurial communities compress operating costs through collective supply chain integration, while the Disabled Creators Alliance actively resists exploitative suffering narratives to protect their creative subjectivity. The resources and emotional support brought by the community have demonstrated outstanding results in practice.

The refinement and improvement of the institutional level have fortified long-term protections for the rights and interests of female digital workers. The guidelines for safeguarding the rights and interests of new forms of employment workers released by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, combined with the governance background of industry employment chaos, clarify the division of rights and responsibilities between anchors and MCN institutions, providing clear policy basis for women creators to protect their rights. Pu'er City in Yunnan Province relies on e-commerce live-streaming training to cultivate local female anchors, effectively driving online sales of agricultural products; The Women's Federation of Fengxian District, Shanghai offers practical new media courses for full-time mothers and unemployed women to help more women achieve employment and income growth through digital platforms.

The joint actions of several actors may reduce the effect of algorithmic limitations and social prejudices to form a more secure development context in the case of digital labor and identity formation of marginalized women [11].

7. Conclusion

This article focuses on a systematic exploration of the labor practices of female digital creators, with a particular emphasis on identifying the characteristics of their labor forms and development challenges. The research results show that the traffic distribution mechanism of platform algorithms, the business operation logic of capital, and the overlapping influence of traditional gender concepts have led to female digital creators being in a relatively disadvantaged position in key aspects such as traffic acquisition, income distribution, and rights maintenance. At present, a basic system has been initially formed to support the development of female digital creators through platform special support, national policy guarantees, local skills training, and community mutual assistance support. However, the systematic empowerment mechanism for this group is still not perfect, and there is still significant room for improvement in the actual effectiveness of multi-party collaborative efforts. Among them, the Douyin Rural Creator Support Project, the Xiaohongshu Accessibility Optimization Initiative, the relevant policies of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security for the protection of workers' rights and interests in new forms of employment, and the new media skills training organized by local women's federations not only provide a feasible path to resolve the plight of women's digital labor, but also further verify the practical value of the multi-stakeholder collaborative empowerment model.

This article only uses short video platforms as the core research carrier, and does not include other media forms such as graphics, audio, etc. in the analysis scope. It also does not conduct comparative

exploration on the labor practices of female creators in different media scenarios, which compromises the comprehensiveness of this study. This is also the main limitation of this study.

Subsequent research can further broaden the research boundary, focusing on the specific impact mechanisms of artificial intelligence technology on women's digital labor, and conducting segmented exploration based on differences in media types, regional development characteristics, and creator group characteristics. This will continue to enrich the theoretical framework and practical experience of the empowerment system for female digital creators, and provide more targeted theoretical basis and practical reference for optimizing the ecology of women's digital labor and improving the system for protecting the rights and interests of female creators.

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